The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History

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Arkansas Memories Project
Bill Harrison Surprise Interviews

Gen Broyles and Merlee Harrison

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

June 10, 2011

Fayetteville, Arkansas

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Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio files, video highlight clips, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at https://pryorcenter.uark.edu. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips, in addition to the transcripts, to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/ redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another..
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
  - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
  - annotations for clarification and identification; and
  - standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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Scott Lunsford interviewed Gen Broyles and Merlee Harrison on June 10, 2011, in Fayetteville, Arkansas. This series of interviews took place during a birthday celebration for William Harrison.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Okay. So I'm Scott Lunsford, and I'm looking at Gen Broyles and Merlee Harrison. Uh—today's date is June the tenth, 2011. We're at Laurie Harrison's house here in Fayetteville, Arkansas. And we're recording these interviews today as a part of the Bill Harrison project. These interviews will be archived and preserved forever at the Pryor Center. Uh—we'll transcribe them. We'll send you the transcripts. You'll get a chance to look at the transcripts, and if there's anything in there you don't want us to put out there in front of everybody in the world, you let us know, and we'll take it out.

Gen Broyles: Okay.

SL: 'Cause it's all about your-all's stories. It's—and it's really your chance to tell the stories you way—the way you wanna tell 'em. Um—there'll also be a copy—uh—of this interview on a DVD in the Special Collections Department at Mullins Library at the

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville campus. Uh—we'll make some of these—uh—parts of these interviews—uh—videowise—available on the web. Um—the entire transcript, the entire audio of these interviews, will be available in the web. It'll be—uh—we'll encourage—uh—documentarians, researchers, students of Arkansas history in public school, secondary schools, graduate schools. We're going to make this available for everybody. So if you guys are comfortable with that—if you girls are comfortable with that, then we'll keep going. And then if you're not, why, we don't have to do this, and we can do somethin' else. So are y'all good with this?

Merlee Harrison: Absolutely.

SL: You too, Gen?

GB: Yes.

[00:01:43] SL: That's a good word, yes. Okay. Well—um—you know—uh—um—Laurie called me about—uh—having a secret gathering, a surprise gathering—uh—for Bill, and—uh—I loved the idea. And she started listing off all the folks that she was thinking about inviting, and I loved it even more. And I talked with David Pryor about it, and he thought it was a fabulous idea and was very enthusiastic about it. So—um—we're here—we're happy to be here. And I really appreciate you-all . . .

MH: Thank you.

SL: . . . givin' us your time to . . .

MH: We're glad you're here.

GB: Glad you're here.

SL: . . . to do this. So usually—uh—we just do one on one. But you girls wanted to do this together, so we're gonna do it together. But I'm going to ask individual questions from time to time . . .

GB: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . and especially here at the beginning.

GB: Okay.

SL: And so Gen—uh—I need to know your full real name and when and where you were born.

GB: My name is Guendaline Graeber Whitehead Broyles, and I was born November 15, 1937, in Yazoo City, Mississippi.

SL: Cool. Okay. Well—uh—and let's go ahead and get you, Merlee. Where were you—uh—born and—uh . . .

MH: My name is Merlee Portman Harrison, and I was born in Dallas, Texas, in 1936.

[00:03:15] SL: Okay. Now, Gen, back to you.

GB: Mh-hmm.

SL: Yazoo City, Mississippi.

GB: Yes.

SL: Um—what were your parents' names?

GB: Charles, and he went by Charlie. But really in Yazoo City it was Charlie [Chă lē].

SL: Charlie [Chă lē].

GB: And my mother was Guendaline, and she was called ?Gwen?.

SL: Uh-huh. And what—what did they do for a living?

GB: My dad—uh—was a—he established his own business. He sold butane and propane gas to people out in the county. And my mother was a homemaker.

[00:03:46] SL: Okay. And—uh—Merlee? What—what . . .

MH: What am I supposed to . . .

SL: Uh—your parents—what are your parents' names?

MH: Oh, all right. My parents were Arnold and Winona Portman.

SL: Uh-huh.

MH: Uh—both from Dallas.

SL: Mh-hmm.

MH: Um—uh—my father died young after the Second World War.

SL: Mh-hmm.

MH: Uh—he had a—um—he was a salesman. He worked for the—uh—post office until he was drafted in—into the army. Uh—and when he came home, he worked as a salesman but not very well. He had a major head wound that he just never quite

recovered from.

SL: Mmm.

MH: And—uh—he—he was fifty-four years old when he died from—uh—cancer. Uh—but he had a very distinguished career in the Second World War—uh—many wonderful stories. And—um—my mother—uh—was a homemaker—uh—until the war, when she went to work for the US Post Office. And then she never went back home again. She—uh—after the war, she went to work for Allstate Insurance Company as an underwriter. So that—that's what they did.

[00:04:59] SL: Okay. Um—Gen, what kind of—uh—um—place was Yazoo, Mississippi, to grow up in? What—what—uh—was that . . .

GB: I had a wonderful childhood.

SL: You did?

GB: It was a small town, about fourteen thousand people.

SL: Uh-huh.

GB: Um—back then, you could go outside and ride all over town on your bike . . .

MH: Mh-hmm.

GB: . . . skate all over town. Your parents didn't seem to worry about you. You just came home for supper. [*MH laughs*] You—

you were just free. It was so wonderful back then. You—you just got out with your friends from daylight—you know, when daylight came until nightfall. It was just a wonderful time to grow up.

SL: And how was Dallas when you were growing up, Merlee?

[00:05:43] MH: Dallas was about 365,000 people.

SL: [*Laughs*] Big difference.

MH: And a Democratic city.

SL: Big difference, then.

MH: And all of my family were Democrats. We didn't even speak to Republicans. [*Laughter*] That's all changed. That's all changed.

SL: Mh-hmm.

MH: But—uh—what I remember most are the—the World War II years because we lived with my father's parents in a new area of Dallas called Oak Cliff. It was brand new, and there was a—a big creek in front of the house and a big wooden bridge that came over the creek. And there were hills, and hills beyond hills, with woods and streams and rocks, and I had sort of the same growing up that Gen did. We would—if—if it were summertime, we got out of bed, and we were out the door as fast as we could in—in our underwear or whatever. Barefooted. We didn't wear shoes—uh—except Sunday to go to church. So

I—I feel like until the end of the war I had just this glorious childhood. Just—with all this freedom. We just ran wild.

GB: Mh-hmm.

MH: But it—uh—it—after the war, it changed. It—it was more difficult.

SL: Hmm.

MH: But—but I feel like I had a great childhood.

[00:07:00] SL: So—uh—both of you went to the public schools in your . . .

MH: Yes.

SL: . . . respective home communities?

MH: Yes.

GB: No.

SL: No?

GB: I was raised Catholic, and I went to a small Catholic school in Yazoo City.

SL: Uh-huh.

GB: My mother had also attended that small Catholic school.

SL: So it was a legacy there that you—uh—followed.

GB: Yes.

SL: So you had—uh—nuns—a—a . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . for—uh—teachers?

GB: Yes.

SL: And I bet it was pretty strict, huh?

GB: It was pretty strict, yes. [*Laughs*] It was. [*SL laughs*] It has since closed because it's—it wasn't as expensive to run a school back then. The nuns taught, and they got just a—a moderate amount of money for their needs.

SL: Mh-hmm.

GB: But once the nuns were taken away and they had to hire private teachers, it became very expensive, and it has since closed.

[00:07:51] SL: Yeah. Was—um—uh—so you were—uh—basically in church almost every day? Is that . . .

GB: Off and on.

SL: Off and on?

GB: Off and on, yes.

SL: Was the—was the—uh—around the home, was—uh—the—um—Catholic upbringing, was it—was there—was there a Bible in the home? Did y'all study stuff at home? I mean, were you . . .

GB: No. My father was Presbyterian.

SL: Uh-huh.

GB: So my father and mother had a mixed marriage. And my mother took her four children to the Catholic church, and my dad

went to the Presbyterian church. So there wasn't much discussion of religion . . .

SL: Okay. Okay.

GB: . . . in the home.

SL: And what about you? Uh . . .

MH: I . . .

SL: . . . you went to public schools.

MH: . . . I went to public schools. I grew up in the Disciples of Christ Church . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

MH: . . . called the Christian Church.

SL: Uh-huh.

MH: And—uh—everybody on my father's side—and I—I guess you could say I was closest to my father's family, though I was close to both. Um—my grandmother was the head of the family. She was strong, and—uh—though she never drove a car, she—she was the strong one. And we all went to the t—Disciples of Christ church. And—and I guess you could say I grew up in the church until I gave it up in—sometime in the [19]50s.

[00:09:16] SL: Well, were you—uh—did you go church more, then, on Sundays? Did you go on . . .

MH: Yeah.

SL: . . . Wednesdays and . . .

MH: Yes, sometimes we went on Wednesdays. Uh—there was always choir practice on Wednesday, and all of my daddy's sisters sang in the choir.

SL: Mh-hmm.

MH: And—um—it—you know, the Disciples of—of Christ is a fairly liberal church.

GB: Mh-hmm.

SL: Okay.

MH: Uh—quite liberal, actually.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:09:43] MH: So there wasn't any hardcore Southern . . .

SL: Dogma? [*Laughs*]

MH: . . . dogma in—no . . .

SL: Yeah.

MH: . . . in our family.

SL: Uh-huh.

MH: Nor was there any—um—any prejudice toward Black people, and that was unusual in those days . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

MH: . . . that there would be none of that. But I grew up in a—in a fairly liberal household.

SL: Liberal environment.

MH: They were political. They—uh—spent Sunday—all—always Sunday after—Sunday noon after church was spent at my grandmother's eating, and then they would sometimes play—uh—42 or dominoes . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

MH: . . . or play the piano and sing. And they always talked politics, always.

[00:10:33] SL: Okay, so—um—um—Gen, when you were—uh—growing up in school, was there any particular subjects that you were attracted to, or felt like you were leaning toward any kind of—uh—career early on . . .

GB: Not really. Not really. No.

SL: And what about you, Merlee? Did you . . .

MH: No . . .

SL: No, just . . .

MH: . . . I can't think of anything. I loved reading, and—um—I was very good at English.

SL: Uh-huh.

MH: I was terrible at math.

SL: Uh-huh.

MH: Terrible. [*SL laughs*] But I liked English, and I sort of liked

history.

SL: Mh-hmm.

MH: But—uh—I liked civics. But I—no, I don't—I don't think there was anything I was particularly drawn to.

[00:11:19] SL: Okay, so both of y'all went to college?

MH: Mh-hmm.

SL: And you got a nursing degree, is that right?

GB: I went to Mississippi State College for Women, an all-girls school.

SL: Uh-huh.

GB: And I had no idea what I wanted to do . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

GB: . . . when I went to school. And I remember my dad driving me there. It was an hour—it was three hours from Yazoo City, and he said, "Well, what do you think you'll major in?" And I said, "I have no idea." And he said, "Well, you know, you could be a secretary [*MH laughs*], or you could be a teacher." So I thought—my mother had been a legal secretary before she married. So I thought, "Okay." So I took typing my freshman year. I did—I had learned typing in high school, but I took typing in college. I was no good at typing, so I knew right away I had to change.

SL: Mh-hmm.

GB: So I majored in elementary education.

SL: Oh, okay.

GB: And I taught two years after I got out of college, the year before Jim and I married and the year after we married.

SL: So you . . .

GB: But I never went back to teaching.

[00:12:23] SL: So how—how did you meet Jim then?

GB: Well, that's an interesting story.

SL: Okay.

GB: I always wanted to get married and have a family. And I decided that if I finished college in three years, maybe I would have met the man of my dreams and I could get married an—a year earlier. So I went to summer school—uh—between my freshman and sophomore year and between my—I guess junior and—I went to summer school both summers, and I finished in three years. [*Clears throat*] Well, when I was at summer school the second time in Millsaps—at Millsaps College in Jackson—Jim was at summer school. He was goin' to Vanderbilt, Jim Whitehead, but he kept flunking algebra, and he kept flunking French. So he was at summer school to try to catch up so he could graduate on time. And that's where I met Jim Whitehead

was at Millsaps College in summer school. Both there for different reasons. [*Laughs*]

SL: Okay now, so now—okay. You were both at Millsaps, then.

GB: In summer school.

SL: In summer school.

GB: When we met, yes.

[00:13:34] SL: And—um—what was your first impression of Jim?

GB: Oh my God. I saw this Greek god walking across the campus. [*MH laughs*] And I had met a girl there who had graduated—uh—from high school in Jackson, and I—I went to her, and I said, "Who is that guy I keep seeing on campus?" She said, "Oh, he's Jim Whitehead. Would you like me to try to get you fixed up with him?" And I said, "Tell me something about him." And she said, "Well, he goes to Vanderbilt, and he plays football." And I said, "Oh, I wouldn't have a chance with him. Forget it."

SL: Yeah?

GB: But [*MH laughs*] he had been noticing me. So he asked somebody in Jackson, "Do you know who that girl is?" And this boy said, "Oh, yeah, I know who she is. She goes with my friend—uh—who goes to Mississippi State, and—and they're going together." So he kinda thought, well, he didn't have a

chance either. But one day I was standing on the campus waiting for a friend to pick me up to go swimming, and he comes walking by. And he stopped, and he said, "Would you like to go to the—to the grill and have a coke?" And I said, "Yeah." [*SL laughs*] And that's how we met. And we—it—it was—it was—it was like dynamite from then on. And we married two years later.

SL: Uh-huh.

GB: He—I had to finish MSCW—had a year left. He had two years left at Vanderbilt 'cause he wanted to get a master's. So I finished MSCW, and then I got a job in Nashville and lived with some girlfriends, and he was livin' with boyfriends. And so we had a year together in Nashville before we got married.

SL: Okay.

MH: And that's when we met.

SL: You—okay, let's talk about . . .

MH: That year in Nashville.

SL: And that's when you-all met?

MH: Yes.

GB: We met in Nashville.

MH: Us couple. We met in Nashville in 1958.

GB: In [19]58. We've known each other since 1958.

[00:15:30] SL: Okay, so now, how did you end up in Nashville?

MH: Well, you wanna know how I met Bill?

SL: Well, if you met Bill [*MH laughs*] before you ended up in Nashville, yes.

MH: It's a good story. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yes, I want to know exactly how you met Bill.

[00:15:42] MH: I was fifteen, and he was seventeen. And we were at church camp. He was the president of the camp. Very popular boy. Very conceited, a word we used back then. [*Laughter*] He really was high on himself. I was just a lowly little first-year . . .

SL: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm.

MH: . . . camper. But he was a senior camper. And they had something at this camp called—uh—the—some kind of a walk, you know, a Sadie Hawkins Day race, and then you had to go on a moonlight walk with whoever you caught. So the boys had to put handkerchiefs, white handkerchiefs, in their back pockets, and then they got a head start. And then the girls would chase them. [*SL laughs*] Well of course, everybody wanted Bill. He was the most popular boy in the camp. And I was nobody. I was this little freckled-face nobody. But I growed up playing tackle football with my cousins. I—I—I knew how to tackle.

And—uh—he thought he was so clever. And he would do this and do that, and I just didn't bother to go for the handkerchiefs. I just lunged and tackled him. And I'll never forget. I can see him today on the ground looking up at me like that [looks surprised], like, "How did you do that?" [*SL laughs*] So he had to take me on the moonlight walk. And the—the—the day that camp ended and we all went home, he ended up at my house that evening. He came over. Borrowed his dad's car, which was a little coupé then—you know, just a front-seater—came over to my house that evening. And that was it.

[00:17:19] SL: Never looked back.

MH: Well, no. I was a fresh—a sophomore in high school, and he was a freshman in college.

SL: Mh-hmm.

MH: So we broke up, and we didn't get back together until, oh, I guess he was a—he—he was already at Vanderbilt, and I was in TCU. He had—he went on to TCU, and then I went to TCU. I was a freshman when he was a senior at TCU. And—uh—but he had married someone else. But then he went on to Vanderbilt University to go to graduate school. And during that period that he was there, he—uh—he and his wife divorced. And he and I got back together at a mutual friend's wedding in Dallas. And

we've been together ever since.

SL: So was Bill doing the theology thing back at that moment?

MH: He was going to teach theology until he lost his religion completely.

[00:18:13] SL: Mh-hmm. And that happened . . .

MH: But he took a double major; the same time he was doing—going to the seminary, getting a B.D. at Vanderbilt, he was taking classes in the—um—English department, and he was writing. And his master's thesis was a play, which I typed in my spare time while working in the admissions office at Vanderbilt. We were married by then. And—um—uh—then we—we left there and went to—after our house burned, Bill had to get out of—drop outta school. And we left there and went to south—to—uh—to—um—Wilson, North Carolina, where he taught. You and Jim went—y'all left there and went . . .

GB: Went to Millsaps.

MH: . . . went to Millsaps.

GB: Mh-hmm.

MH: Then out of—out of Wilson, North Carolina, we followed John Yount to the—to the University of Iowa—the Writers' Workshop. And then you and Jim followed Bill and me . . .

GB: Mh-hmm.

MH: . . . the year we left the workshop—you two went . . .

GB: [Nineteen] sixty-three to [19]65.

MH: Yes.

GB: Mh-hmm.

MH: But all this time we were real close.

SL: So y'all met each other when you were in Nashville.

MH: Yes, before Jim and Gen were married.

SL: And you were both at Vanderbilt at the time?

MH: Yes.

GB: She was married. I was not married then. I w—I was going with Jim . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

GB: . . . and so I would go to Nashville to visit him.

SL: Uh-huh.

GB: And Jim and Bill had met in classes.

MH: In a classroom.

GB: Mh-hmm. And so I got to know them because Jim knew Bill and just thought the world of him, and he said, "Well, you have to meet his wife." And so we—we became friends before I ever married Jim.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:19:58] SL: You know, I've heard stories about Jim in the

classroom as a student. That he was pretty precocious. I mean, and he kinda . . .

MH: I have a story to tell you about that.

SL: Okay. Well, let's—give me a classroom story of Jim. Is this at Vanderbilt?

MH: Well, it's about Jim and Bill.

SL: Okay.

MH: And John Holmes.

SL: Okay.

[00:20:18] MH: There's a—there was a student named **Janie**. And we were at a party. She lived in that big house on College Avenue with Mary Troy and somebody else. We were at a party one night, and I said, "Well Janie, what do you think? How are you doin', and what do you think?" And she said "Oh," she said, "John Holmes is so kind. He's so wonderful. I just love him. He's got all these wonderful stories." And she said, "Jim just makes me want to write. He's so inspirational. He just turns us all on, and we just want to write for him and please him." And she said, "I guess Bill's gonna teach me how to write." [*Laughter*] She was not looking forward to taking Bill's class, as many of them weren't. [*Laughs*]

GB: Oh my goodness.

MH: But I think Jim had that reputation. He won teacher of the year one year. And the reason I wanted Gen here—this is a party that Laurie's throwing for her dad partly because Jim died young. He was not supposed to die when he died. And Laurie said, "We need to do this now." But there wouldn't be a program without Jim and Bill.

GB: Right.

[00:21:35] MH: There wouldn't be one. They—it was theirs together. And after Bill and I came here and Claude Faulkner said, "You know, I want a writer," and he had called the University of Iowa, and Paul Engle had said, "Well, see if you can get Bill Harrison. He's in south Texas, and I don't think he's very happy there." And we were dyin' to leave south Texas. And so we came up here, and it—Paul—I mean, Claude was wonderful. He just wanted—it was his idea to start a writing program. And he asked Bill, "How do you do it?" And Bill said, "Well, I would need a poet, and I know the one. His name is Jim Whitehead. And he's at the University of Iowa right now, and if we can get him, we've—we can get a program. We can start a program." That's how it happened. I don't know if y'all talked it over before you decided to come, what the conversation was.

GB: Oh, we were delighted.

SL: Really, what was—how was it that y'all ended up . . .

GB: We were delighted to come here. Jim had a job offer to go back to Jackson, Mississippi, to Millsaps, where he had been for three years, and neither one of us were happy there. [*Clears throat*] So when we had an offer to come to Arkansas, even though I'd never seen Fayetteville, just the idea of going somewhere other than back to Jackson was just wonderful. And actually, when I got here, I felt like I had died and gone to heaven. It's just the most wonderful place. There's no racial tension. There was no racial tension, and that's all that Mississippi was at that time. In [19]63, the civil rights workers were killed. Jim and I went up to Iowa. We drove home in the spring of [19]64. We were stopped in the middle of the night by a policeman because we had an Iowa driver's—uh—Iowa . . .

[00:23:25] SL: Tag.

GB: . . . plate on our car. It was terrifying. The policeman said, "What are you doin' in our state?" And Jim jumped out, and he had a commercial driver's license because he had driven a truck in high school, and he had always kept that. And he jerked out his driver's license, his commercial driver's license, and he said, "I am from Mississippi, and we're going to Yazoo City to see my in-laws. And I have an Iowa tag because I'm going to school in

Iowa, and I had to buy a tag." It was terrifying, so we both wanted to get out of Mississippi, and just the prospect of going back there to teach with all the problems that they had and putting our school—children in private schools or public schools. It was—just coming up here was—has just been the most wonderful thing that ever happened to us. We loved it here. And the writing . . .

MH: Yeah.

GB: . . . program was so successful. Everything just went our way. It was just wonderful.

[00:24:24] MH: It did. We were—Bill and I planned to be here two years. We thought, "Well, we'll be here two years." [*SL laughs*] Once Jim and Gen said they were coming, we knew—and that a program was starting—we knew we were here. And we loved it. We've always loved it. And I mean, I call it home. People ask me where I'm from, and I have to say, "Well, I grew up in Texas," but otherwise I claim I'm from here.

GB: Right.

MH: We love Fayetteville.

SL: Well, it had to be really, really exciting that you were getting to start a program.

GB: Yes.

MH: Mh-hmm.

SL: I mean, that's laying . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . the foundation. And by all accounts, it's totally beyond anyone's imagination a successful program.

MH: Bill and Jim . . .

GB: Yes.

MH: . . . Bill and Jim were so handsome and charismatic [*SL laughs*] and . . .

GB: And young. We . . .

MH: And young and talented.

GB: Yes.

MH: So talented.

GB: They were thirty when they—when we came here. They were very young.

MH: Bill had published maybe two short stories and was writing a novel. I don't know if that would happen for anybody today.

GB: Yeah.

MH: We were in the right place at the right time.

GB: Yes. We were.

[00:25:43] SL: Well yeah, and speaking [*camera clicks*] of times, I mean, that was early, mid-[19]60s.

MH: Yes. Mid-[19]60s.

SL: It was kind of a major—there were all kinds of shifts going on . . .

MH: Yes.

SL: . . . culturally . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . and politically . . .

GB: Yes.

MH: Well . . .

SL: . . . and worldwise, and . . .

MH: . . . we ought to speak to that, the difference in the program in those years and how it's evolved.

SL: Yes.

[00:26:07] MH: It's very different now than it was. It was—the beginning of the program was so exciting. The students, of course, were [19]60s, [19]70s people, and there was so much energy and naughtiness [*SL laughs*] and unique personalities that came to this program that it—I mean, it was totally exciting.

GB: It was. And Jim and Bill both wanted a social relationship with the students, not only the classroom but outside the classroom. We had parties all the time.

MH: All the time.

GB: And they were always at my house or her house or the students' houses. The students had all these opportunities to be together, share their ideas on writing, on literature, be around Jim, be around Bill, out of the classroom. Plus, we had all these visiting writers that they paid to come in. And we always had a big party for them so that the students could sit at their feet and talk to them about their ideas.

MH: And we had famous authors coming through here . . .

GB: Yes.

MH: . . . constantly.

GB: Yes, we did.

[00:27:19] MH: But one—just for example, I don't think this would happen today. But one of the stories—and I think it—Paul Williams, who you'll interview in a little while. It was a party at his house. I hope David won't mind. [*Laughs*] David Kuhne doesn't drink anymore, but he was drinking in those days. And Bill said—when Bill went to the party, he said, "David, do not drive. You are in no shape to dive—drive. Do not drive." "I—I won't, Mr. Harrison. I won't." At two or three in the morning, the phone rings. David is in jail. [*Laughter*] And Bill has to go down to get him out. And on the way home, Bill said, "David, I told you not to drive." He said, "Oh, Mr. Harrison, I wasn't

driving. They caught me crawling across College Avenue." [*Laughter*] So there are just a million stories like that. I don't think you would see that in the program today. It's more—I think the teachers who—except for Skip, the teachers who are there—they don't have the personal investment that we had, or that Bill and Jim had. And that's another thing. Bill and Jim were very different personalities that, for some reason, absolutely worked to make this program what it was. If they'd been the same kind of personalities, it wouldn't have worked as well.

GB: No. Uh-uh.

[00:28:35] MH: But what they did have—what they wanted for the program, they never argued about. They were never in disagreement about. They knew what they wanted for the program.

GB: Right.

MH: They knew how to get it . . .

GB: Right.

MH: . . . and what to do, and so they—it's like they were just the perfect match at the perfect time. And there are over four hundred major books that have come out of this program. I mean, major writers, far more famous than our husbands . . .

GB: Mh-hmm.

MH: . . . who have come out of this program.

GB: Mh-hmm.

MH: And you know, they were both extremely proud of that.

GB: Yes.

SL: You know, I think it was Boogie was talkin' about the workshops that were outside of the classroom, and I'm startin' to get this image that the workshops may have morphed into social times where it was more relaxed and maybe argumentative and maybe sometimes hurtful, but . . .

MH: All of that.

SL: . . . it was kinda the thing where, you know, maybe you'd inflict some pain, and then it'd be followed by a hug—that kind of camaraderie that encouraged strength. Somehow or another, out of all the madness, everyone came out of it stronger. Is that . . .

MH: Yes.

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . kinda the way it . . .

MH: Yes.

GB: Yes.

[00:29:56] SL: . . . was? And also, you know, it was a time—there

was all—back to the movements that were happening. You know, the civil rights thing was in full speed back then, the Vietnam War, there was the whole hippie thing, make love not war, peace, that kinda—there was all this youth energy going on.

MH: Oh . . .

GB: Right.

MH: . . . so much energy.

SL: All across—I mean, it wasn't just in Fayetteville. It was all across.

GB: Yes.

SL: But in Fayetteville, it seemed . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . by accounts the creative writing kids were—just became major innovators and players within this community—within the Fayetteville community.

MH: They were different . . .

SL: I mean, they . . .

MH: They . . .

SL: . . . everyone knew who everyone was and . . .

MH: They were different.

SL: Yeah.

[00:30:44] MH: They were different from most of the students who were coming from other areas of Arkansas. They were coming from everywhere—New York, Chicago, Maryland.

GB: Ireland.

MH: Ireland.

GB: China.

MH: Lot from Ireland, China . . .

GB: Yeah.

MH: They came from everywhere.

GB: Yes.

MH: And they brought, I think, a wonderful kind of sophistication and diversity to this community . . .

GB: Yes, yes.

MH: . . . that it did not have previous to this writing program.

[00:31:10] SL: So—but you know, you have to give both Jim and Bill credit that they were able to look at the pool of applicants.

GB: Yes.

SL: And maybe they didn't have the highest grades . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . and maybe they weren't quite writing the best, but they could see a thread of talent that was laying . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . there . . .

MH: It was rigid.

SL: . . . fertile.

MH: To get in was—it was rigid. It was a rigid process to get into this program because it was very small. They wanted it small because Bill and Jim were mentors. They weren't just teachers or professors. They were friends and mentors to the students. So as Bill said, he—some of 'em hated him, but when he would say to some—like he said to one student once, you know, "You need to do somethin' else." And the student was very angry. And he said, "But you brought me here. Why did you bring me here if I can't write?" And Bill said, "It's just like recruiting, you know, for the" . . .

SL: Quarterbacks. [*Laughs*]

MH: . . . "for"—yeah. With—you know, "You show talent, you either—you get here, you can do it, or you can't do it." And I said later, "How can you be so mean?" And he said, "Merlee, I would be mean if I let them waste three years of their lives doing something that they really—that I think they really can't do." And he said, "They need to hear the truth" . . .

SL: Yeah.

MH: . . . "early on so they can move on with their life."

[00:32:50] SL: [*Sighs*] Okay, so I feel like we should hear a little bit more about Jim. I mean, I know we're kinda here—but I feel like they were so much a team that we know more about—we know some more about Bill by hearing some more about Jim. So talk to me a little bit about Jim. I mean, your-all's gatherings at your house are pretty famous. [*MH laughs*] I mean . . .

GB: Well, he—anytime there was someone at the house to see Jim, there was a wonderful conversation going on. Always. Now I miss that so much now that he's gone. I don't care if it was a student or a friend or just someone who stopped by. There was always wonderful, interesting conversation going on that I wasn't always a part of but I was listening to. Just always very intelligent, enlightening conversations that were just wonderful. I really miss that since he's gone. But he loved the students, and he had them over all the time. He was all—he was real involved with them. And if they were having martial problems, he worried about them so much. And he would try to counsel them. "Don't get a divorce, my goodness. You're married. You should stay married. Don't get a"—he was—he just—he really was involved with the students. He really cared about them. [00:34:21] And they knew that. They knew that. And they always felt like they could come by anytime of the day or night

or call him anytime of the day or night. For instance, I remember one time we got a call about midnight from Fort Smith, and this young man had been riding his motorcycle down there and had a wreck and wanted Jim to come get him. And then I remember Bob Day that you're gonna interview—he and his wife had been to Kansas, and coming back they had a big argument. And she was driving [*MH laughs*], and she made him get out of the car. [*Laughter*] And she drove all the way back to Fayetteville, and she called Jim, and she said, "Would you ride back with me?" This is the middle of the night. And Jim said, "Gen, what do you think?" And I said, "Absolutely not. [*MH laughs*] You are not to go with her to get her husband. She kicked him out. She can go back and get him." Now Bob probably doesn't remember that story, but there were calls. They would show up and wanna talk about something they had written, and he was always so welcoming.

[00:35:18] SL: So they did call?

GB: They did call.

SL: They did come by whenever they . . .

GB: And they did—and they would just—he was always so welcoming. "Oh, come on in. Let's talk." You just felt like that was so important to give of himself.

SL: And Bill felt the same way.

MH: No. [*MH laughs*]

SL: He did not?

[00:35:32] MH: [*Laughs*] No. Bill said Jim's door was always open, and when he didn't want to fool with anybody, he'd say, "The guy you wanna talk to is right over there. [*Laughter*] That door right there." Oh, yeah. Bill was more selfish than Jim. Jim was completely unselfish when it came to students, and he had a reputation for having an open door. He was always available to them. And I think that's another reason that things worked so well. Because if they had both been like Bill, heavens. [*Laughter*] No. Bill had students that he really favored, and he was always there for them when they—if they really needed something, like to be gotten out of jail. Or I remember ?Koffman? was in trouble once. Didn't take his medicine. He was bipolar, and he was—I don't know. He was gettin' into all kinds of trouble on Dickson Street, and the police went down there and got him, and he got in the police car and locked the police out—[*SL laughs*] out of the car. And he had spent all of his money, first of the . . .

SL: Semester . . .

MH: . . . year money that he got, grant money to go to school on,

and he was broke. He'd just been—anyway, when Bill got down to the police station, they said, "Mr. Harrison, could he possibly have gotten off his medication?" So I think even the police department understood about the students.

SL: Yeah.

MH: But no, Jim was more generous than Bill with his time.

GB: Oh, and all the students called him Jim. He would not allow them to call him Mr. Whitehead. "Call me Jim." Did they all call Bill . . .

MH: Oh, they all called Bill "Bill."

GB: Yeah, they all went by their first names.

MH: They wouldn't have thought of saying "Mister." [*Laughs*]

GB: They thought it was, I guess, an easier way for the students to identify with them if they could call him by his first name.

[00:37:23] MH: I'd like to insert here that Bill and Jim never considered themselves academics, do you think?

GB: Not really. Huh-uh.

MH: Jim was certainly an intellectual. I don't know about Bill. Bill was just a typical writer. Jim was, I think, more intellectual. But they both hated academics. [*Laughter*]

GB: They hated the politics that went on.

SL: Yeah.

MH: And they did not consider themselves academics or the—though they wanted the highest, best academics comin' . . .

GB: Yes, yes.

MH: . . . out of their program. And they designed the program so that it was tougher. I think they had to have sixty basic hours or something like that.

GB: You had to have more hours here than any other program . . .

MH: Writing program.

GB: . . . in the country to get your master's in fine arts.

MH: Your M.F.A. To get—yeah.

GB: Yeah.

MH: And all the kids knew that when they came here, that it was . . .

GB: Yes.

MH: . . . gonna take 'em longer.

SL: Boot camp. It was gonna be the . . .

GB: Yes, yes.

SL: . . . marines.

MH: They had a tougher program. [*Unclear words*].

SL: Marines of . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . creative writing.

GB: Yes.

[00:38:29] SL: Well you know, and that's another plus for the community 'cause these guys were—the students were committed to doing what they felt like they wanted to do at the time, which was write. And you know, you talk about the first-name basis. You know, when you're writing something, it's so personal. I mean, even if it's a manual on something, it's still you . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . putting your thoughts and your words on paper . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . and exposing your work. It's like painting. Doing a painting. And you're gonna get criticism for it. And maybe the first-name thing kept the door open as far as back and forth and maybe establishing a colleague relationship instead of a teacher-student thing, and kinda maybe op—kept the doors open a little bit more.

[00:39:28] MH: Well, I think it was definitely more colleague the way they treated the students . . .

GB: Yes, yes.

MH: . . . who came here. Definitely. Now they were tough, both of them. Bill and Jim both had very high standards.

GB: Yes.

MH: And I've seen both of them go off on people who they thought were slacking.

SL: Exactly. I mean, you better be prepared.

MH: But it wasn't condescending. They were never condescending.

SL: Maybe . . .

MH: They were mentors.

SL: . . . maybe it was disappointment that they were expressing, or maybe not disappointment, maybe—well they—you know, you invest your time in someone, and you're tryin' to help them do better, and if they don't do the work, it's hard not to blow up. It's hard not to express your disappointment and . . .

GB: Right.

MH: Well, you can edit this out later if you want, but I hope that when you get people in here to interview, you ask about Jim because this really is as much about Jim as it is about Bill.

SL: M'kay.

MH: He's just not here. It's . . .

SL: Yeah, we've been talkin' about Jim.

MH: Yeah, yeah. Oh, and there's so many good stories [*laughs*] about Jim.

SL: Well, tell me some more about Jim.

[00:40:59] MH: Do you remember—was it Reed Durbin?

GB: Mh-hmm.

MH: Who was crazy and had the gun?

GB: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm.

MH: You can tell this story better than me. When Jim took the psychology—the psychologist who was blind?

GB: Mh-hmm.

MH: He took him out to Reed—Reed was brandishing the gun and gonna shoot I don't know who all, and so somebody, Reed's wife, maybe, called Jim and said, "You gotta come out here." So he gets the blind psychologist. Do you remember this story?

GB: No.

MH: They go out to the country where Reed lives. And this was a little guy, and he was blind. He couldn't see—and I'm not telling this story as well as Bill could, and maybe somebody else remember it. But when they got there, Jim calls out to Reed and says who it is, and Reed starts shooting. [*Laughs*] And Jim grabs this man and throws him into the bushes. Anyway, that's one of the wild stories. Oh, there's so many. And a lot of these people you'll interview will remember more than we do.

[00:42:04] SL: So no one got hurt, though?

MH: No one got hurt.

GB: No, but thank goodness . . .

MH: I think they finally . . .

GB: . . . Reed Durbin left town because he was a very dangerous person.

MH: He was . . .

GB: And occasionally we would have students like that, and their parents would end up calling Jim. I don't know if they called Bill.

MH: Yeah.

GB: But they would call and say, "We're real concerned about our son. Please tell us what's going on. What can we do? Should we come get him?" And so Jim and Bill were intermediaries sometimes between the parents and the students. And there weren't many. There were just a couple, really.

SL: Right.

GB: But . . .

MH: Ten or twelve. [*Laughs*] No, I'm teasing.

GB: Reed sent Jim a bullet in the mail, and he sent him—he sent Jim his—copies of Jim's books and wrote on the outside, "This man is a fake." And I've got all those things. It's real interesting. But he just was—he went off the deep end. And bless his heart. He was married and had a child, too. And he went to Germany, and he was riding a motorcycle in Germany and was killed.

MH: Was killed.

[00:43:05] SL: Hmm. [Pause] It's—I guess it'd just be impossible not to get involved with the students' lives when you're . . .

MH: It was for us. It was impossible for us. We had to.

SL: Well, I mean, still, the program may not be like it was when they started it, but that it's still there and it's survived . . .

MH: Well, Skip and Patty Hays are there. And Skip was one of the top students in the program and went off to Illinois and taught. And then when Bill and Jim both knew they were gonna retire, they wanted someone who had some investment in the program to come and be a part of it. So Skip and Patty left Illinois and came back here. Or Missouri. I don't know where they were.

GB: Illinois.

MH: And came back here and—but Skip's going to retire in a year or two. Maybe in a year. But they still—it's still—they've mentored a lot of students who will be here, a part of this, and who Skip went to school with, was in the program with, and who will be here. And . . .

[00:44:22] SL: So some of the graduates are coming back . . .

MH: Lots . . .

SL: . . . to fill those roles?

MH: No. I wish they were, but I mean, be here for this party.

SL: Oh, okay.

MH: But I don't know who will come to replace Skip. It—and maybe there will never be anyone again who has the . . .

SL: Yeah.

MH: . . . same emotional investment that we had.

GB: Mh-hmm. [*Unclear words*].

MH: I wish that weren't so, but . . .

SL: Times have changed, haven't they?

MH: Everything changes.

SL: Yeah.

GB: Yeah.

[00:44:52] SL: Well, is there—are there—I feel like you girls know more about where all the bodies are buried and where all the stories, or a lot of the stories, that maybe others don't know. Are there any other stories that you wanna tell me about?

GB: There were—like I was saying, there were lots of student parties. They were called student parties because the students—the parties were for the students. And we would put out chips and dips, and the students would bring anything they wanted to drink. But these parties would go on till one, two, three o'clock in the morning. And I had small children, so many times I would excuse myself about eleven thirty or twelve and go to bed. And then after my children left home, I started working. I became a

nurse and started working. So I had to get up at five thirty in the morning. And I'll never forget one party, about eleven thirty, I was talking to one of the women there, and I said, "I've gotta go to bed. I've got to get up really early in the morning." She said, "Oh, you always leave just when the party's getting good." And I said, "I'm sorry, but I have to get up in the morning." So I would go in my bedroom and close the door, and the noise didn't bother me at all. [*Laughs*]

SL: Thank goodness.

GB: They would keep going till two and three in the morning. And Jim was very good about—several students would help him clean up. After everybody had gone, they'd pick up all the . . .

SL: Debris.

GB: . . . cigarette butts and the debris and the beer bottles and put 'em away so that I didn't get up in the morning to a wrecked house. [*SL laughs*] But . . .

SL: To *Animal House*.

GB: [*Laughter*] They really—they loved those parties. And I think they were very important. I really think they were important.

MH: I do, too.

SL: I don't think there's any question about that.

GB: Yes.

[00:46:36] MH: We had a party one time—it was when Larry McMurtry was visiting. He was our visiting writer.

SL: Gosh.

MH: And it was our house—little house over on Hotz. I don't know how we got everybody in that little house 'cause it was small. And at five in the morning, Bill and I were so tired.

GB: You had stayed up?

MH: Yes.

GB: Oh my goodness.

MH: You know, I had kids too, but they—little kids, but they were downstairs in their bedrooms in bed. And at five in the morning, Bill said, "I have a great idea. Let's all go down to the Waffle House" or whatever it was out here on Highway 71 "and have breakfast." "Okay, okay, okay, let's go." He ushered everybody out the door, slammed the door, and locked it. [*Laughter*] He did.

SL: That's good.

MH: That's how he got rid of them. [*Laughs*] Because they loved it. They didn't wanna leave. They didn't wanna go home. They had some more things to talk about.

[00:47:29] GB: I have to tell this Bob Ward story.

SL: Okay.

GB: You've just interviewed him. He was visiting us once in the same house, and Bill's . . .

MH: This was after he had graduated? Or was he a student here?

GB: He was still here.

MH: He was a student here. Okay.

GB: Yes, but he was over at our house when Bill's daddy and his little second wife, who was quite elderly, were there. And we were sitting in the living room talking, and she reached in her purse, and she brought out this Kleenex, and she opened it up, and she said, "I have some rental property, and I—they moved out, and I was over cleaning it up, and I found this little pill. And I think it's drugs." And Bob said, "Let me see, let me see, let me see." [*Laughter*] "Let me see, let me see." And he grabbed that, and he opened that up, and he just died laughing. He just fell on the floor laughing, and he says, "It's a Benadryl." He thought he was on to somethin' really good.

SL: Well, at least he knew his pharmacology.

GB: Yes, wonderful. Yes, that's great.

MH: Oh.

GB: Yes.

[00:48:35] MH: Well, those were great years.

GB: They really were. And we had lots of energy then, too. We—

being old now, we talk about how we don't have the energy we used to have as youngsters. And that's true of everybody I know.

SL: Yes.

GB: But we had lots of energy, and we had lots of fun. It was a great program.

[00:48:53] SL: Well, there was a almost immortal energy going on back then, anyway. Everyone could do anything as long as they felt like—I mean, they just—they'd just go. And it . . .

MH: Scott, were you in high school back then? Or . . .

SL: I graduated in [19]70—high school in [19]70.

MH: Okay, so you were just out of high school during some of those . . .

SL: Yes.

MH: . . . major angry years, I call them.

SL: Yes. Uh-huh. I was—you know, I was a football player and captain and all that. But I was also in—started playin' in rock-and-roll bands in junior high school.

MH: Uh-huh. Oh. Uh-huh.

SL: So I had some of that . . .

MH: I remember that . . .

SL: . . . culture stuff happening.

MH: . . . I remember that . . .

SL: Yeah.

MH: . . . about you, yeah, that you were in a band.

GB: Yeah.

SL: I mean, I kept that up through a couple years of college and then got into the recording business, and here we are.

MH: But you've always wanted to stay here. Is that right?

SL: That's right. I stayed here. I spent a summer in Yellowstone and a couple in Los Angeles. But I had to, you know, marry out of town. [*Laughs*]

GB: Yes.

SL: None of the mothers would have anything to do with me here. No, I don't know.

MH: Well, what early things do you remember hearing about the program . . .

SL: Well . . .

MH: . . . and Bill and Jim?

SL: . . . I probably—you know, Meredith . . .

MH: Yes.

SL: . . . was a part of our—she wasn't in the band, but she was a part of our group for probably a year or so.

MH: I didn't remember that about Meredith.

[00:50:29] SL: So yeah, we—back when Meredith and Robert Benton were living on Reagan Street, just off of Lafayette and Arkansas, that was kind of our compound. There was another band member that lived next door. And we spent a lot of time together. So I started hearing more about the program then. And you just pointed out that my brother Gary was married to Jane. And I didn't realize that she was a part of the program. Or was she part of the program?

MH: Jane wasn't part of the program . . .

SL: She was married to Robert.

MH: I met Jane because I was working at developmental junior high school and . . .

SL: Okay.

MH: . . . and she was teaching there.

SL: Okay.

MH: And we just became very good friends. She did come to some M.F.A. kinds of parties.

SL: Yeah.

MH: She was kind of one of the people on the outskirts of the program.

[00:51:25] SL: Mh-hmm. Mh-hmm. And see, now when did *Rollerball* hit?

MH: *Rollerball* was made in [19]75 or [19]76.

SL: Okay.

MH: It was—Norman Jewison bought the rights to it in [19]73 or [197]4. And I think it came out in [19]75.

SL: M'kay.

MH: Bill and I were back here by then. We'd been in London. We'd lived in London that year—in Europe, various places, that year. But we were in London when Norman Jewison bought it.

SL: So was that a sabbatical? Were y'all just doing a sabbatical out there, or how . . .

MH: It was a sabbatical. No, it was a Guggenheim.

SL: Ah.

MH: Bill had a Guggenheim grant. We had gone two years earlier on sabbatical and spent $30,000 over our budget that we borrowed from Hayden McIlroy . . .

SL: Yes.

MH: . . . who will be at our house tonight, and we came home and bought a bookstore, which I ran for two years and paid off our $30,000, and Bill said, "Let's go back to Europe." [*SL laughs*] And he applied and got a Guggenheim, so off we went again.

[00:52:40] SL: Uh-huh. Now what bookstore was it?

MH: House of Books on Dickson Street.

SL: House of Books. Is that right?

MH: Bought it from John Dacus's—no. What was the couple who bought it from John Dacus's parents? What was their name? Oh, I can't remember. They were from Chicago, and Gen came. [*Laughs*] But I came back to sell that bookstore. The family were on the East Coast getting ready to sail for Europe. And I came back to sell the bookstore inventory. Gen came down. I went to Gen's house. I said, "Gen, they're cheating me. They're not—they're supposed to do half the inventory." I was doing half the inventory with Phyllis, our good friend Phyllis, who is my accountant. Phyllis looked at me, and she said, "Merlee, I keep good books. They're not inventorying this properly. They're" . . .

SL: Something's up.

MH: . . . "they're cutting out." Mh-hmm. So I went to Gen's house, and I was lamenting it, and Gen said, "All right, I—come on. I'm gonna help you. We're gonna go down there." She redid everything. I don't if you remember this.

GB: Mh-hmm. I do.

[00:53:51] MH: You reinventoried everything they had done. Everything they had inventoried, you and I did. We stayed late and re-inventoried everything. And when we presented it to

them, they said, "Oh. Oh, well, that's fine. That's fine." They just came from Chicago, and they were used to doin' things the way people in a big city did it. They didn't expect us to be honest. They thought we were gonna cheat. So they cheated. But anyway, that worked out. But then I think I was staying with you. But then we got that all done, and I sold the bookstore, and Bill and I went back with our kids to Europe for another year.

SL: That's wonderful.

[00:54:30] MH: So somehow we were talking about London. I don't know how we got on London.

GB Did you ever take a class from Jim or Bill?

SL: No.

GB: Because I know Jim sometimes—frequently—taught some undergraduate classes.

SL: Yeah, now, my . . .

GB: Did Bill . . .

MH: Bill taught some undergraduate classes.

SL: I had a—yeah, I had a friend, a very good—still a good friend, Franz Baskett . . .

MH: Yes.

SL: . . . that I believe had both of y'all.

MH: Yes.

SL: Jim and . . .

GB: Then he went into the program.

SL: Yeah.

MH: Yeah.

GB: Yes.

SL: I—that's correct.

MH: I remember Franz well.

GB: Yes.

SL: Yeah. I always thought Franz would be the guy to write the Fayetteville story here, but . . .

MH: Somebody needs to.

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . he hasn't gotten to it.

GB: Yes.

MH: Who's gonna do that? Help us think of who could do that.

SL: Well, I think Franz has the mind to do it, but . . .

MH: I think Laurie could do it, but I'm not sure she has the energy.

SL: Yeah?

MH: Barry Hannah was an undergraduate when we started the program. And he moved over from, I guess, the Ph.D. or M.A. program in the English department to the writing program as

soon as it was established. But I think he had taken an undergraduate class from Bill and Jim.

[00:55:39] SL: Did—once the program got started, was—I mean, it sounds like you had such a train of great writers that came in and spoke, and it . . .

GB: Did.

SL: . . . sounded like you had plenty of high-end applicants to choose from. And you set up a wri—they set up a writers' program. Was the university really committed and supportive of the department? I know it seemed like Claude Faulkner kinda said, "We should have a writing program. And he got y'all in on it to start it.

GB: He was very supportive, and Ben Kimpel was very supportive.

MH: And Ben Kimpel was very supportive.

GB: And after they left, we started havin' some problems.

MH: Well, Ken Kinnamon was real supportive . . .

GB: Was he?

MH: . . . but a lot of the English department was—there was some friction—and—between the writing program and the English department. Because they—as one of them said to Bill, "Well, you always vote in a block." And Bill said, "Well, there's fewer of us than there are of you, and you always vote in a block."

[*Laughs*] So . . .

SL: Well, it's kinda two different goals, really.

MH: Yes.

SL: Isn't it?

[00:56:48] MH: Yes. But what happened is the writing program took a lot of the assistantships from the English department to give to their students.

SL: Yes.

MH: Because that's how they would support a student to come here, is they would give them one or two classes to teach, and that was an assistantship, and that's what these writing students lived on. And the writing students were proving to be excellent . . .

SL: Teachers.

MH: . . . teachers. Excellent teachers. And their classes were always full.

[00:57:20] GB: And Jim and Bill would try to offer these visiting writers the going rate of what you pay them plus their expenses. And sometimes they couldn't quite come up to what the writer wanted. But they usually could get close enough. And if they couldn't get all the way up, the—Jim would always say, "Well, you're welcome to stay at our house. That would save you from

paying a hotel bill." And so quite a few stayed at our house. We had a guest bedroom, and they didn't seem to mind all the children, so [*laughs*]—we had a great time. I met a lot wonderful people that way.

MH: Yeah, we did. Ralph Ellison came through here.

GB: Oh, my gosh. We had . . .

MH: I mean, the people . . .

GB: I wish I had a list of all the . . .

MH: Yeah.

GB: . . . visiting writers that we had.

SL: I guess we need to get that list at some point. I wonder who would have that.

MH: Well, you do. You do, because Brian Moore, Larry McMurtry . . .

GB: Jim Dickey was here several times.

MH: Yeah. And the poets—we had some really well-known poets come through.

[00:58:16] SL: Now so let's talk a little bit about—getting back to the program. Who—we start with Jim and Bill. And is—who's next? Is it Miller—did Miller come in next?

MH: Did Miller or John Holmes come?

GB: Nineteen seventy-one. Miller came in [19]71. He was the next one.

MH: And he came in, of course, to teach poetry, but also to run the press. And that was part of his contract. He wanted a magazine. And so to get Miller they had to offer him a pre—the press job.

SL: Okay.

MH: So he did that as well.

SL: That's cool.

MH: And then John Holmes was a visiting writer . . .

GB: He was here for maybe five years.

MH: . . . a couple of times, but then he came in on a permanent basis until he retired. And they were here. And Shirley was great at helping. We—Gen and I had nobody to help us with parties until Shirley and John came. And Shirley threw great parties. [*SL laughs*] They threw great parties.

SL: So was that part of the job description?

MH: No. [*Laughter*]

GB: It wasn't . . .

MH: It was part . . .

GB: . . . but everyone just enjoyed it.

SL: Yeah.

MH: And we sort of knew, as wives, that's what we were supposed to do. [*Laughs*] I guess we never questioned it, did we?

GB: No, we just [*unclear words*].

MH: We never said no.

GB: No, we never did. We just enjoyed it.

[00:59:38] SL: But you guys loved it, right?

GB: Yes, we did.

MH: Yes.

GB: We enjoyed it.

MH: Somewhat.

SL: Somewhat? I guess . . .

MH: Some parties were harder than others. There was . . .

GB: Occasionally, someone would come in that had not—we didn't know. The word had spread there's a party, and I remember one night a young man came in, and I didn't know who in the world he was. And he was acting so strange. And a good friend of ours was there that night. You know Sarge West?

SL: Yes. Yeah.

GB: Okay.

MH: Sarge and Shirley were. . .

SL: Sure.

GB: Sarge West . . .

MH: . . . a large part of these parties.

GB: . . . a wonderful Black man . . .

SL: Yeah, sure.

GB: . . . who does karate and everything and . . .

SL: That's right. Third degree.

[01:00:15] GB: This young man that came in that I didn't know who in the world he was—we—I was standing in the hall of my house, and he came out in the—he was coming in the hall and wantin' to know if he could go downstairs where all my children were. And I said, "No, you may not go downstairs." And he said, "Well, why not?" And Sarge is standing there, and I grabbed on to Sarge. I said, "Sarge, please don't leave me, please don't leave me. This man cannot go downstairs." And he said, "You are not to go downstairs. Now go back in with the other children—other kids." But you just never know who's gonna walk in. And usually at the beginning of a party, I'd try to stand at the front door and introduce myself and hope I recognized the names of . . .

SL: Yes.

GB: . . . the kids that were coming. But every now and then . . .

MH: It would get . . .

SL: Word got out and . . .

GB: . . . strangers appeared.

MH: Yeah. It would get outta control every now and then.

GB: It was a little bit scary sometimes, but if I told Jim, he'd kick 'em out immediately.

[01:01:08] SL: Sarge West . . .

GB: Is the most wonderful man.

Trey Marley: Scott, we need to change tapes.

MH: Sarge and Shirl . . .

SL: Oh, we've—all right, we gotta change tapes.

MH: All right.

SL: But we're gonna talk a little bit more about Fayetteville . . .

MH: Okay.

SL: . . . and some of the personalities.

[Tape stopped]

[01:01:19] SL: Okay, so Gen, we were talkin' about the nature of these parties. I think it's important that we kinda define . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . the activities at these parties.

GB: Yes.

SL: Yes, there was alcohol involved, and there were students and teachers involved, and they would go on all night . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . two or three in the morning.

GB: Yes.

SL: Until you could kinda push 'em out the door. But the nature of the parties were not really just wildness going on.

GB: No, the nature of the parties—they were always intellectually stimulating. The students were all talking to each other, to Jim, to Bill, to the wri—visiting writer. They were all talking about literature. They were talking about books. They were talking about religion, politics, philosophy. It—they were all intellectual conversations. They got so much out of them. It wasn't a drunken brawl. It was very, very intellectually stimulating.

SL: Well, what did it do for Bill and Jim?

GB: I think they thoroughly enjoyed it because, after all, they were the mentors, and they had the last word, usually. [*Laughs*]

SL: Well, they had lived longer.

GB: They had lived longer, and they, I think, they thoroughly enjoyed them. They did.

MH: Yes, yes.

GB: Jim would hardly ever miss a party because they—frequently, a student would call and say, "I'm havin' a party at my house tonight. Can you come?" And Jim would go. I didn't want a ba—get a babysitter. So I wouldn't go. But he never wanted to miss them.

MH: I . . .

GB: They just loved them. There were so many ideas expressed and so many things to talk about. They loved it.

[01:03:00] MH: I wanna tell you somethin' about Jim.

SL: Okay.

MH: I loved Jim. Once Bill and I were having people over, and he said, "Well, who else should we invite?" And I said, "Well, Jim and Gen, of course. Because this is a dull group." And [*SL laughs*] if you had Jim at a party, from the moment he walked in the door, sparks started flying. [*SL laughs*] I'm not kidding. I'm not kidding. You didn't always like it. [*Laughter*] But it was never a dull party if Jim was there. Never. If you were gonna have a dull group, get Jim there. It was not gonna be dull.

SL: So nobody would was—could waste their time.

MH: No.

GB: No, and that's the way it was at the student parties. They were always fascinating. They were. And sometimes they were just—they would go in Jim's study, a group of them, and Jim would start playing all his favorite music. Country music or whatever, and they'd start stomping around in there. And my daughter said at Jim's memorial service, "Oh, I'll never forget all the nights I slept under—my bedroom was under Dad's study. I'll never forget the nights when there'd be loud music and all this

stompin' in there. They were in there dancin' in this little room." Because Jim would start playing his music, and he wanted everybody to listen to it. Then they'd go back out in the kitchen or start talking. And it was just always just enlightening and sparks flying. [*Laughs*]

[01:04:29] MH: Yeah. Yeah, they did. You know, I read a book called *We Were All So Very Young*. Are you familiar with that book?

SL: Hm-mm.

MH: It's about—it's tol—the main story's about the Murphys, who were wealthy, and they had Hemingway and [*sighs*] artists and writers and . . .

SL: The Murphys out of El Dorado?

MH: No.

SL: Oh.

MH: No. They're just famous. They're the Murphys, Gerald and Sara Murphy.

SL: Okay.

MH: And they were, in the [19]20s and [19]30s, famous friends—rich friends of people like Hemingway, the people who—the writers and artists who went to Europe. And I was reading that book, and I thought, "Hmm, that's an interesting life, but no more

interesting than what we had right here in Fayetteville with the different kinds of people—artists and writers who came through to be a part of this program or just to see Bill and Jim."

[01:05:35] SL: Well now, how did Sarge West end up in . . .

MH: Miller. Miller got Sarge in here, didn't he?

SL: Miller? Miller did?

GB: Yeah, I think so.

SL: You know, I can remember him early, early on. He was a body repair guy at Sines . . .

MH: Yes.

SL: . . . Body Shop.

MH: For years.

SL: And his son, I think—I actually backed his son up at a Woodland Junior High School talent show.

MH: Really?

SL: [*Laughs*] Yes.

MH: Which—well, which one was it? Do you remember?

SL: I'm trying to remember.

GB: Was it Joseph? Was it Joseph?

MH: Joseph?

SL: No.

MH: Tony?

SL: Tony.

MH: Tony.

SL: I think it was Tony.

[01:06:15] MH: Well, Miller had lots of parties, and they were somewhat wilder than our parties, I think. Usually. [*SL laughs*] And I don't know how he met . . .

SL: Sarge.

MH: . . . except I think it was because of the music. I think it was the kind of music that Miller loved and—do you know how he met? How they met?

GB: Hm-mm. I don't. Hm-mm.

MH: They were always at Miller's parties. Always.

[01:06:42] SL: Well, see, you know, even—you know, is that [19]70s or [19]60s? I guess, when did Miller . . .

GB: He came in [19]71.

SL: [Nineteen] seventy-one. Yeah.

GB: So it was [19]70s and more of the [19]80s. But you know, once it became known that you shouldn't have second-hand smoke around . . .

SL: Yeah.

GB: . . . everybody that smoked would go out on our patio . . .

SL: Yeah.

GB: . . . which is just right beside the house. And there were some great conversations that went out on—went on out there.

SL: On the porch.

GB: And I know after Jim retired, a young man wrote him and said, "I'm gonna be in Fayetteville, and I wanna come by your house. I wanna sit on the patio. 'Cause it's not worth comin' to Fayetteville if you can't sit out on Whitehead's patio and talk." [*MH laughs*] I thought that was so neat.

SL: Yeah, that is neat. That is great.

GB: Yeah.

SL: Yeah, I'm so sorry I missed all that. I just never got over there.

MH: You know, and ?Sean? and Susan Perabo, with their children, drove all the way from, I don't know, wherever they are, but far up there, north. They didn't have a lot of money, and they—for Jim's memorial, when Jim died, they drove all the way down here. And . . .

GB: And one girl drove by herself from Connecticut.

MH: Yeah.

GB: Yeah.

MH: And they just said, "Oh, we had to come. We had to come."

GB: Yeah. Yeah.

[01:08:01] SL: Well you know, it's a very easy question for me to

ask everybody else that we're talkin' to about how Jim or Bill affected—what effect they had on their lives, but it's a little bit more difficult to ask that question of you guys because you also had a huge [*laughs*] effect on their lives.

MH: Mh-hmm.

GB: Right.

SL: I mean, did you ever feel like—I mean, other than just the support of what they were doing, was there ever a time when either one of them looked at you and you knew that you had said something to them, that a bulb went off in their head, and they got something that maybe they had missed [*laughter*] or that they had not thought about or that kind of aha moment? Is there—did you-all ever deliver any of that for those guys, or . . .

[01:08:58] GB: I don't know. I just know that I gave Jim a lot of freedom because he was free to teach and write. And I kept the books, paid all the bills, took care of the house. The only thing I ever asked him to do was to please take the cars to the mechanics 'cause I was always afraid that I was being taken advantage of if I took a car in to be repaired. "If you'll just please take the cars in to be repaired, I'll do everything else." [*SL laughs*] And I did. And s—because I wanted him to have time. I didn't want him to be burdened with just the normal,

everyday things that I really enjoyed doing. I didn't mind at all.

SL: Yeah.

GB: So that worked out real well. In fact, I have a picture of him mowing the yard when we first moved here, which was in 1965, and I showed it to my kids, and they said, "That's probably the only time Dad ever mowed the yard. [*Laughter*] Can't believe we got a picture of it."

MH: Got a picture. [*Laughter*]

SL: A real piece of history.

GB: A little piece of history, yeah.

SL: Yeah.

GB: But—so he had time.

SL: That's a wonderful gift.

GB: Some time, anyway. Yeah.

[01:10:04] MH: Jim adored Gen. He never made any decisions without running it past her because she's the most pragmatic, practical woman who ever walked the earth. [*SL laughs*] So you know, if you want to know who to call for anything, ask Gen. She's researched it, and she knows it. But Gen—Jim never made any decisions without her. He always said, "Well, I'll have to ask Gen." [*Laughs*] Always.

GB: And like those calls he got in the middle of the night to go pick

up somebody in Fort Smith. And he always said, "Do you think I should go?" And frankly, I always said no if he had to get in the car and go out a long way in the middle of the night. I said, "We've got a house full of kids. I can't afford to have you gettin' killed" . . .

SL: Yeah.

GB: . . . "on the highway going to get a student that's gotten in trouble. They need to call their parents or someone else." So I wasn't very forgiving when they called about problems they'd gotten themselves into.

SL: Personal stuff.

GB: Yeah.

SL: Yeah.

GB: I just didn't want to take a chance on him having problems because of them getting themselves into trouble. So I was not very nice on those occasions.

[01:11:15] SL: Well, it sounds like he was already burdened with their personal trials, anyway . . .

GB: Yes, he was.

SL: . . . without havin' to physically change his time . . .

GB: Yeah. Yeah.

SL: . . . that he had to do the things that he had to do.

GB: And he loved that. He really did.

SL: Yeah.

GB: He loved all of that.

SL: Okay now, what about you and Bill? Is there . . .

MH: Bill and I have an interesting relationship.

SL: Okay.

MH: It's not maybe the usual.

SL: Good.

MH: I did all the things Gen did. I did everything and—because the—for the same reason. Bill—it was like he had blinders on. He was trying to teach school and write novels, and it's like he couldn't see beyond that. And so I took on everything else. And I don't think he understood it or appreciated it until later—a little bit later in life. He certainly does now. But I had a friend recently say, "Oh my gosh, when I first met you and Bill, you just scared me to death the way you went at each other." And I said, "Ah, but that's how we relate." And she said, "Well, I understand that now." [*SL laughs*] But—and I said, "Listen. If I didn't give it back as good as" . . .

SL: He gave it out.

MH: . . . "he gives it, I—it would be like I was being run over, like, by a Mack truck." Because Bill has a tough mouth, as you know.

Gen laughs at him. And I say, "Will you quit laughing at him?" It's not funny to other people when he makes them the butt of his jokes. But she just cackles. [*SL laughs*] So he really performs when Gen is around.

GB: Right. [*SL laughs*]

[01:12:58] MH: He does.

GB: And I love it.

MH: And I say over and over, "Quit laughing at him." [*Laughter*] But he's—in some ways, they were both very hard to live with. But in other ways, they weren't, you know. They—we always knew no matter what they did that they loved us and that they wouldn't—we couldn't drive 'em away with dynamite. [*SL laughs*] I . . .

SL: Well . . .

MH: . . . shouldn't tell this story, but once I said to Bill, "I am going to divorce you." And he said, "Oh, Merlee. Don't divorce me now. Every time you open the door, I'll be there. We'll just have to get married again." [*Laughter*] So what could you do but laugh, well, you know . . .

SL: Yeah.

MH: So I laughed. [*GB laughs*] I wasn't serious anyway.

SL: Well, I think you got serious attention—you drew serious

attention when you tackled him . . .

MH: I—yeah, probably.

SL: . . . instead of pulling his handkerchief out of his pocket.

MH: Probably.

SL: Yeah, I think that gained immediate respect.

GB: Right.

[01:13:55] MH: But I don't know about any aha moments. I've had many of those. I don't—I don't know. I think Bill and Jim's appreciation of us and what we did was a little—came a little more slowly with time. When maybe they had achieved some of what they wanted to achieve, they were better able to look at who we were, and who Gen and I are, and their families. But when they were young, they were so . . .

SL: Driven.

MH: . . . driven. Both of them. Yes. They were so driven. And needed to be. They had a family to support.

GB: Right.

[01:14:75] SL: Well, there is that. I guess as the program—as they started churning out writers, and those successes started coming back, there had to be some kind of relief and some kind of, I don't know, maybe even some more confidence that what they were doing, and what they had started . . .

GB: Right.

SL: . . . had taken root. And if nothing else, this group and this group . . .

GB: Right.

SL: . . . are out there supporting themselves . . .

GB: Right.

SL: . . . and they're doing good stuff. And it's stuff we can be proud of . . .

GB: Right.

SL: . . . and that they're proud of and are making differences.

MH: I never heard any of them—either of them [*GB clears throat*]—whine about not having as much success as they thought they deserved. And I have heard East Coast writers whine, "But I didn't get reviewed here, and I should have been reviewed there." And Jim and Bill both seemed to have great perspective on who they were, where they were, what they had done, and a lot of gratefulness about their life here and what they'd been able to do here. I'm very proud of that. I'm very proud of that with both of them because I know a lot of writers who think they deserve more then they've gotten and are unhappy with what they consider their success. And Jim and Bill never whined or complained about what they thought was lacking. I think I'm

most proud of that. And what they did in this program.

SL: Real men.

MH: Yes.

[01:16:32] SL: Anything else?

GB: Well, it was wonderful that they met at Vanderbilt. And Bill—they were in a philosophy class together, and Bill tells this story about how Jim, who was this big, six-foot, five-inch football player, would come in, and he would take a chair, Bill said—you have to get Bill to tell you this. He would take a chair, and he would lean it up against the wall. And he'd put his feet up on another chair, and he would expound. [*SL laughs*]

MH: He would put it right up there . . .

SL: Up front . . .

MH: . . . next to the . . .

GB: Teacher.

MH . . . to the teacher in the front. I think Bill told this story, didn't he?

[01:17:03] SL: I've heard this story. I'm not . . .

MH: Yes.

SL: . . . sure. I may have heard it at the memorial service, but I can't—I'm not sure, but I've heard it once or twice before.

GB: Well, when Jim died, I got a letter from that philosophy

professor.

MH: What was his name?

GB: I can't think of it right now.

MH: I can't either.

GB: Saying that, "You know, people don't realize that football players can be very, very bright. And I really enjoyed having him in my class." Because you have an idea of the football players, you know.

SL: Sure.

GB: So I could not get over—he remembered Jim. It's fifty years! He remembered him!

SL: There was probably no one ever like him in that class again.

GB: Maybe not.

MH: There's no one like Jim, and there's no one who's ever met him who doesn't remember him. [*Laughter*]

SL: There you go.

MH: He was unique.

[01:17:50] GB: Yeah. So we've had a wonderful life here. We really have.

SL: Well, it sounds like the two of you kind of found each other and had . . .

GB: And that's been wonderful too.

MH: We're very close.

GB: Yes . . .

MH: We've . . .

GB: . . . that's been wonderful.

MH: . . . we've been close for, gosh, how many years?

GB: Since [19]58.

MH: Since [19]58.

GB: Yeah.

MH: Yeah.

GB: And it's just so wonderful that we ended up together in the same town. Our children have grown up together, and it's just been a wonderful life. Really.

MH: I can't say enough about having been here. There's absolutely no place in the world I want to be rather than here. I've loved traveling. I've always wanted to come back to Fayetteville. It's just I—you know, a friend of mine said—my neighbor said, "Don't we have a wonderful secret that other people don't know how great it is here?" [*Laughs*]

[01:18:48] SL: Yeah. I'm afraid some of that's gotten out. But you know, one of the messages we hope that we portray in all the stuff that we're doing with the Pryor Center is that you can make it happen in Arkansas.

GB: Yes.

SL: You can take what is here . . .

MH: Oh, absolutely.

SL: . . . and do what you want . . .

GB: Yes.

SL: . . . and have everything that you need, and you can do it really from here, even if you chose to stay.

GB: Yes.

SL: There's a way.

MH: There's never been anyone more brilliant than Bill Clinton comin' out of Arkansas. He's a phenomenon.

SL: Yeah.

GB: Yes.

SL: Hope. There's a lot—I can promise you—we—you know, we go all over the state getting . . .

MH: Good.

SL: . . . and I cannot tell you how many incredible stories of people that I get to sit across from.

MH: I wanna thank David Pryor.

SL: Okay.

GB: Yes.

MH: A lot of people take their war-chest money and keep it. And I

wanna thank him. This was a wonderfully generous, thoughtful gift to make to the state of Arkansas.

GB: Yes.

SL: It is.

GB: Thank you.

SL: He'll appreciate that.

MH: Thanks, Scott.

SL: You bet. You bet.

MH: Thank you.

GB: Thank you. This has been wonderful. Thank you so much.

SL: Okay. Okay, girls.

[01:20:09 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]